

Work continues on new bridges over the Maury River near Lexington. Story on page 4.

# INTERSTATE 81 UPDATE

News about planning the future of I-81 in Virginia

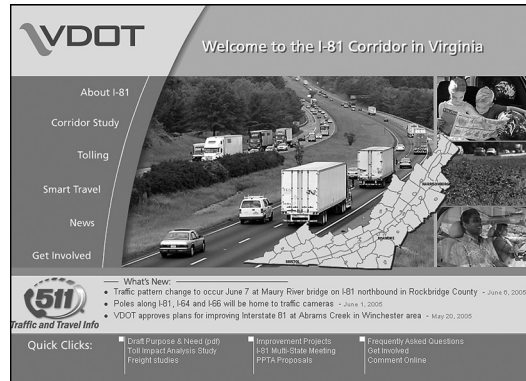
## Find the facts at I-81.org

Official information about many issues associated with Interstate 81 in Virginia is available to people everywhere through a newly designed and easy-to-remember Web site, **[www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org)**.

Users will find details about the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study currently under way by the Virginia Department of Transportation for the Federal Highway Administration. Information about VDOT's application to FHWA for tolling I-81 is posted there. Users can read about the history of I-81 and also learn about the interstate's unique characteristics in Virginia. Fact sheets about several issues associated with I-81 can be downloaded easily and printed from the site.

Also featured is an e-mail address, **[81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov](mailto:81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov)**, and an on-line form that citizens can use to submit comments and questions to VDOT. By early June, more than 270 e-mails from individuals, groups and organizations have been received, and each writer has been acknowledged with a response and answers to questions.

The new Web site is updated weekly, so users should check often for news. Currently, the site is viewed nearly 1,000 times per day. The I-81 pages are hosted on VDOT's Web site. The new **[I-81.org](http://I-81.org)** helps citizens quickly find the information they need.



## Work continues on Corridor Improvement Study

Interested citizens will have opportunities later this year to review the Tier 1 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that is being prepared for the I-81 corridor.

"Although we hoped to have the Tier 1 DEIS ready this spring, we need extra time to develop and screen potential improvement concepts," said Fred C. Altizer P.E., I-81 program manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation. "It's important for people to know that no decisions have been made about I-81. This study will provide a crucial foundation of facts for those who ultimately will make decisions about I-81."

When the Tier 1 DEIS is complete later this year, then VDOT will make it available for people to read and review. There will be an announced period of time for citizens to make comments about the document, and public hearings also will be held in several locations throughout the corridor.

"We want to be sure we haven't missed anything in taking more time with Tier 1," said Altizer. "We are continuing to evaluate and analyze more than 150 possible concepts for improvements, as well as tolling scenarios. Once that is complete, we plan to hold public hearings, perhaps this fall."

see *STUDY*, page 2

Study (continued)

The availability of the Tier 1 DEIS and dates of the public hearings will be publicized widely through newspaper advertising and many other means, including VDOT's I-81 Web site, [www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org).

The DEIS will contain a description of current and future conditions along I-81.

EXISTING & FUTURE TRAFFIC			
Vehicles per day			
Intersection	1973	2003	2035
I-77 (Wythe Co.)	21,400	41,000	100,000
I-581 (Roanoke)	24,700	51,700	114,100
I-64 (Lexington)	15,300	41,700	77,700
Route 50 (Winchester)	18,900	56,200	109,000

Source: Draft Purpose & Need I-81 Corridor Improvement Study

It also will describe concepts for improvements, including both highway and rail improvements that could be made. Study team members continue to work on developing and screening those concepts. Some ideas that are being studied are additional lanes, potential rail improvements, combinations of rail and roadway improvements, and opportunities for separation of trucks and cars.

Citizens contributed ideas and concepts for the Tier 1 study to consider during a series of I-81 Scoping Meetings held in February 2004. About 1,100 comments were received. A summary of citizen input can be read at [www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org).

Another component of the Tier 1 study is applying various toll scenarios to the improvement concepts to assess how traffic could be affected. VDOT submitted an application to the Federal Highway Administration to place tolls on I-81 as a source of paying for improvements, should decision-makers decide to proceed with construction. Information about the tolling application also is available on-line.

The Tier 1 DEIS is being prepared by VDOT for FHWA.

Program manager sets the record straight on Interstate 81 planning in Virginia

By Fred Altizer, I-81 Program Manager

A lot has been said about Interstate 81 in Virginia -- much of it true and some of it not so factual. It's important for everyone to understand what really is happening. So let's clarify the misperceptions I hear regularly in my travels up and down I-81.

**FICTION** - "VDOT and STAR Solutions are negotiating a massive expansion of I-81, up to 12 lanes wide."

**FACTS** - Nothing could be further from the truth. VDOT is negotiating a business partnership with a group of companies, dozens of them from Virginia. If successful, negotiations will lead to an agreement to do business, not a contract to build a specific plan. Design is not part of negotiations because the Commonwealth Transportation Board and the Federal Highway Administration will decide what to build or not to build, *not* STAR Solutions.

**FICTION** - "An agreement to expand I-81 is a done deal between STAR and VDOT."

**FACTS** - No decisions have been made about I-81 in Virginia. It is true that VDOT is negotiating with STAR Solutions to be the builder of any major improvements that decision-makers decide are right for I-81. However, we don't know if negotiations ultimately will be successful. Even if they are, choosing STAR as a potential partner is allowable under Virginia law. We need to be very clear that choosing STAR does not mean that we have decided to build four more lanes or 12 more lanes or truck separated lanes or anything else that people may have heard.

**FICTION** - "VDOT has the cart before the horse in choosing a builder before decisions are made about what to build."

**FACTS** - There is nothing improper here. Negotiations with STAR Solutions are proceeding under a Virginia law called the Public Private Transportation Act of 1995. This law allows the VDOT Commissioner to decide whether to do business with a particular firm following a multi-level review of a proposal submitted by the firm. While negotiations are under way with STAR, VDOT is conducting a transportation and environmental review of I-81 under a federal law called the National Environmental Policy Act. Proceeding under both of these laws may be unusual, but it is not illegal or unethical. In fact, the two processes are totally separate. FHWA has said that both processes may continue simultaneously.

**FICTION** - "VDOT has a Tier 1 draft environmental impact statement."

**FACTS** - This is not true. Any document that the media, groups or individuals say they have acquired as part of the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study is unapproved and incomplete. Working papers, reports and data continually are being revised and rewritten for the I-81 study, much like a book that is being written and rewritten by its author. Until the document is signed by FHWA, it is not an official DEIS. Later this year, an official DEIS will be ready for public review. At that point, citizens, officials and interest groups will have a complete document and will be able to express their opinions about its contents during public hearings this fall.

**FICTION** - "VDOT's study is not considering rail."

**FACTS** - The I-81 Corridor Improvement Study is a multi-modal study, meaning it will consider road and rail improvements and combinations. The study will paint a picture of how I-81 will look in the year 2035 if there are no improvements to the current road or rail network. Then it will describe improvement concepts that will work to meet future needs.

**FICTION** - "Trucks cause all the problems on I-81."

**FACTS** - Even if there were no trucks on I-81, there still will be major congestion problems. We have to look at the future. By the year 2035, total traffic will nearly double throughout the corridor. Two out of every three vehicles will be a car, not a truck. This means the number of passenger vehicles alone will approach 90,000 vehicles per day near Wytheville, Roanoke, Harrisonburg and Winchester. Other areas of major congestion will include the Blacksburg, Christiansburg and Staunton areas. In other words, if there are no changes to I-81, by 2035 the interstate will face the same congestion issues Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads are facing today -- with or without the trucks.

**FICTION** - "There should be a law in Virginia that keeps trucks in the right lane."

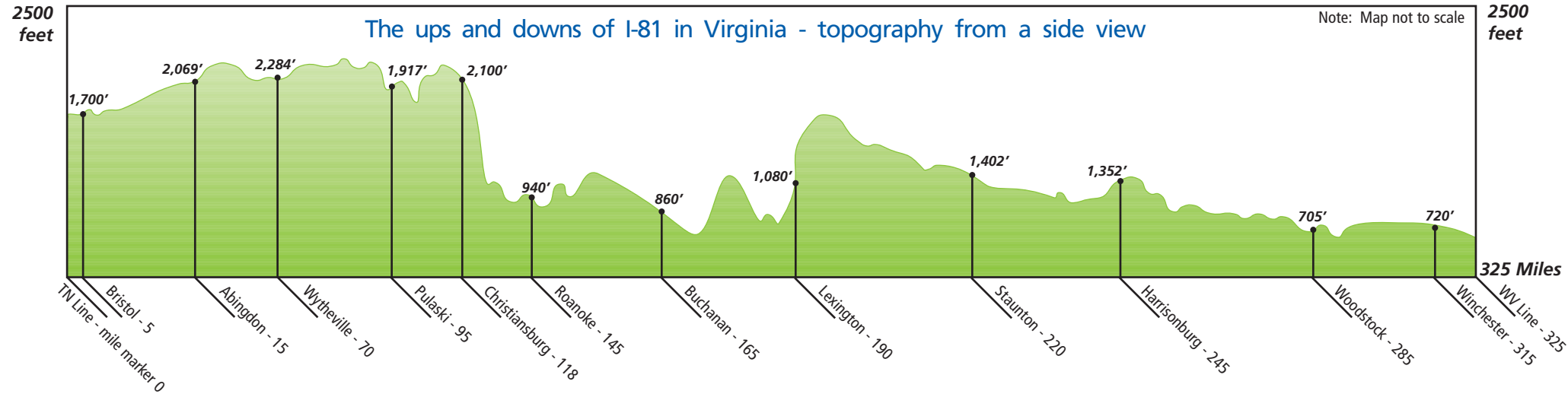
**FACTS** - Actually, there is such a law. On roads that have three or more lanes in each direction, trucks are restricted to the far right two lanes. But most of I-81 only has two lanes in each direction, and if trucks were restricted to the right lane, then there practically would be a wall of trucks in the right lane. It would be very difficult for cars to enter and exit the interstate. Because of the up-and-down terrain of I-81 (*see chart below*), it is safer to allow drivers of both cars and trucks to move freely, adjusting their speeds as necessary.



Most of I-81 only has two lanes in each direction, so trucks have to use both lanes for travel.

And there is one more statement I hear frequently: "Rail is the answer to I-81." The truth is we don't know the answer yet. We have to take an objective look at what the future holds for I-81 and then match possible solutions to it. The I-81 Corridor Improvement Study, which is considering rail as well as highway improvements, will show the effectiveness of concepts as well as impacts possible improvements could have on the human and natural environment. Later this year, when many more facts are available, we'll have more answers.

In the meantime, I encourage everyone to stay informed, ask questions and get the facts. I would be happy to hear from you at [81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov](mailto:81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov) or (540) 767-6081.



At a glance...  
Status of I-81 initiatives

Tolling Application

VDOT submitted an application to the Federal Highway Administration in March 2003 to place tolls on I-81 as a source of funding, should the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) and FHWA direct VDOT to make major improvements to the interstate. FHWA gave VDOT's application early approval, called "conditional provisional acceptance." VDOT will invite public comment on tolling during public hearings to be held later this year on the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study.

Corridor Improvement Study

The first tier of a transportation and environmental review of the I-81 corridor is under way, and public hearings on its findings may be held in fall 2005. This study will provide facts that the CTB and FHWA will use to make decisions about I-81. *No decisions have been made.* Preliminary data from the corridor study is posted at [www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org). VDOT and FHWA launched the study in January 2004 pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. The study will objectively identify problems along the interstate corridor, as well as identify concepts or ideas for potential highway and rail improvements that could solve the problems.

Private Proposal

Negotiations between VDOT and STAR Solutions, a group of Virginia and national companies, began in March 2004 under Virginia law. Negotiations could yield a business agreement for STAR to build I-81 improvements that may be selected by the CTB and FHWA. *Negotiations do not include specific highway design.* Any information, maps and pictures presented by STAR Solutions are ideas only. The I-81 Corridor Improvement Study will help determine what may be built. To date, no agreement or contract of any kind has been signed.

More information is available from these sources:

I-81 Office of Program Management  
Virginia Department of Transportation  
108 N. Jefferson St., Suite 307  
Roanoke, Va. 24016  
(540) 767-6081  
FAX - (540) 767-6079

E-mail: [81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov](mailto:81info@VDOT.Virginia.gov)  
Web site: [www.I-81.org](http://www.I-81.org)



# INTERSTATE 81 UPDATE

Summer 2005

I-81 Office of Program Management  
Virginia Department of Transportation  
108 North Jefferson St., Suite 307  
Roanoke, VA 24016

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## Project updates: Changes come to I-81

### Smart Traffic Centers in Staunton, Salem

Managing traffic along I-81 took big steps into the 21st century with the recent opening of two 24/7 Smart Traffic Centers (STC). Staff in both facilities work together to operate intelligent transportation devices such as overhead message signs, highway advisory radio stations and cameras, in addition to providing real-time traffic conditions to 511 and [www.511Virginia.org](http://www.511Virginia.org), a free travel service. Information from signs, radio, phone and the Internet goes directly to drivers, who can make better-informed decisions about traveling on I-81.

Staunton's STC is housed in a new building totaling 6,200 square feet located at VDOT's District Office on Commerce Road in Staunton. The building also serves as base for the Augusta County office of the Virginia State Police. VDOT and VSP shared the \$1.3 million price tag, with VDOT providing almost two-thirds of the cost.

Salem's STC is temporarily located at VDOT's District Office on Harrison Avenue. Operators control message signs from the



Operators constantly monitor traffic conditions and maintain communication with emergency services.

Roanoke Valley to Bristol. Nine more message signs are being installed beside the interstate from Wytheville to Bristol at a cost of \$1 million; they should be operational by August 2005.

### Median guardrail in Roanoke, Botetourt counties

About six miles worth of double-sided guardrail will be installed at various locations along the median between Salem and Troutville.

Median guardrail helps to prevent crossover crashes where the median is narrow. The project will cost about \$1.7 million and will get under way later this summer. Similar guardrail installed further north in Botetourt County has been struck on both sides many times, indicating its effectiveness.

### New bridges in Rockbridge County

Construction to build four new bridges on I-81 in Rockbridge County is well under way. North- and southbound bridges over the Maury River are being replaced as well as the north- and southbound bridges over Buffalo Creek. Total cost of the work is approximately \$45 million.

Speed limit has been lowered to 55 mph through both work zones; concrete barrier walls are in place to separate drivers from construction. Blasting is taking place at the Buffalo Creek bridges. Recently, northbound traffic was switched to the new bridge over the Maury River. Two lanes of through traffic will be maintained in both directions at all times during construction of these projects. Both bridges are expected to be complete by the end of summer 2007.

Motorists can get daily information about the projects and any impact on traffic by calling 511 or 1-800-578-4111 or by going online to [www.511Virginia.org](http://www.511Virginia.org).

### Abrams Creek interchange in Frederick County

Interchange improvements will begin by summer 2006 at Exit 313 in Frederick County. The northbound acceleration ramp will be extended to 1,025 feet, and a new bridge will be built across Abrams Creek to accommodate the ramp. Also, the intersection of the northbound entrance ramp and Route 50/17/522 will be improved with additional lanes and updated signals.

As part of the project, the southbound on-ramp loop will be eliminated. All traffic entering southbound I-81 at Exit 313 will use the existing southbound ramp on the west side of the Route 50/17/522 bridge. The turn lane from I-81 south to Route 50/17/522 will be lengthened. Total estimated cost is \$8.9 million.

